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10 Things You Should Know While Crossing the Rubicon

guest article by Yves Van Vaerenbergh

Glory be, I defended my PhD (in October 12, 2012)! I wrote my dissertation in rather challenging circumstances. Even though I obtained my PhD at Ghent University's Center for Service Intelligence, I actually worked as a teaching assistant at University College Ghent. I taught about four courses a year, and supervised about 15 bachelor and master thesis students a year, among others. Needless to say, this is not your typical PhD job design!



Ironically, these circumstances actually facilitated my transition from a PhD student to an assistant professor. I was hired as an assistant professor months before defending my PhD. I always wondered why. The discussions with my recruiters resulted in a list of ten things PhD students could do – or should realize – to increase their chances of starting as an assistant professor.

#1: Your 'A-level' publication is only your entry ticket

PhD students do research, and try to get that research published in a nice journal. Stating that recruiters value A-level publications is like trying to break through an open door. But carefully assess what is meant by an 'A-level' publication! Some universities will not consider your application unless you have JMs or JMRs. Other universities might be impressed when you published a paper in JAMS or JSR. Other universities will invite you if you published a paper in a journal with impact factor. Standards differ across universities and across countries, so always check what it takes to become an assistant professor in a given context.

Once you have that 'A-level' publication, however, you may soon come to a sad realization: This publication is a necessary but insufficient condition. Recruiters are interested in YOU, and not only in your papers.

#2: Work with people who are smarter than you

Getting the entry ticket is often a team effort, and choose your co-authors wisely. Basically, you have two options. You can work with people who are less intelligent than you. This creates a very comfortable position, and boosts your self-confidence. The other option is to work with people who are smarter than you. At times you may feel stupid, but these people will challenge your assumptions, and help you to become a better researcher.

#3: Write a paper without your supervisor

A PhD trajectory is paradoxical: It requires an intense collaboration between a PhD student and a supervisor, but the ultimate goal of a PhD program is to train you as an independent researcher. Recruiters will assess your independence. They want to hire you, not your supervisor. One way of demonstrating your independence is to work on a project without your supervisor. Recruiters will love it! Of course, first obtain your supervisor's approval J



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#4: Review others' papers

Focusing on your own research might make you myopic. Your paper is –without a doubt– flawless. However, less than 10% of submitted papers make it into the service journals. Reviewing other people's work can be very illuminating. It might help you understand how others wrote their paper, to detect their flaws, and to experience first-hand why papers get rejected. Of course, you cannot expect reviewing journal submissions right away. Start with a friendly review of your colleagues' papers, review papers for major conferences (like EMAC, ACR and AMA), or read your supervisor's reviews. These first experiences will not only help you to become a better researcher, but are first demonstrations of service to the community.

#5: Teach!

Assistant professors are expected to teach. Recruiters will not only assess your research skills, but will also assess your teaching abilities. Candidates with excellent research skills but poor teaching skills might not make it during job interviews. Try to teach at least some sessions every year. This will actually be beneficial to your research. Teaching a service marketing course allows you to better position your own research within the broader domain. Moreover, you can easily note the difference between PhD students with or without teaching experience during conference presentations.



#6: Go international

Universities are looking for international profiles. So attend international conferences, collaborate with international researchers, or visit another university. Your professor might get invitations to teach abroad, but might not always have time to do so. Maybe he or she can suggest you as a replacement.

#7: Work on your English skills

More and more universities are offering programs in English in order to attract more international students. Hence, universities hire people with excellent English skills. Practice! Watch (YouTube) movies without subtitles. Analyze others' writings. Interact with native speakers. This might be frightening at first. But remember: Native English speakers are often impressed by the fact that you can address them in their native language (usually they cannot address you in your native language J)!

#8: Provide service to your university

Assistant professors are also expected to provide service to their university. Recruiters will assess your potential to take up a management role in the future. Be part of a committee. Show that you are willing to take responsibility, but of course, don't exaggerate!

#9: Collaborate with business

Get out of your office and talk with managers. Managers often outline interesting research problems, and stimulate you to think differently. This will not only serve as input for your own research, but will also help you to give students examples while teaching. Above all: business schools like candidates who closely collaborate with business.

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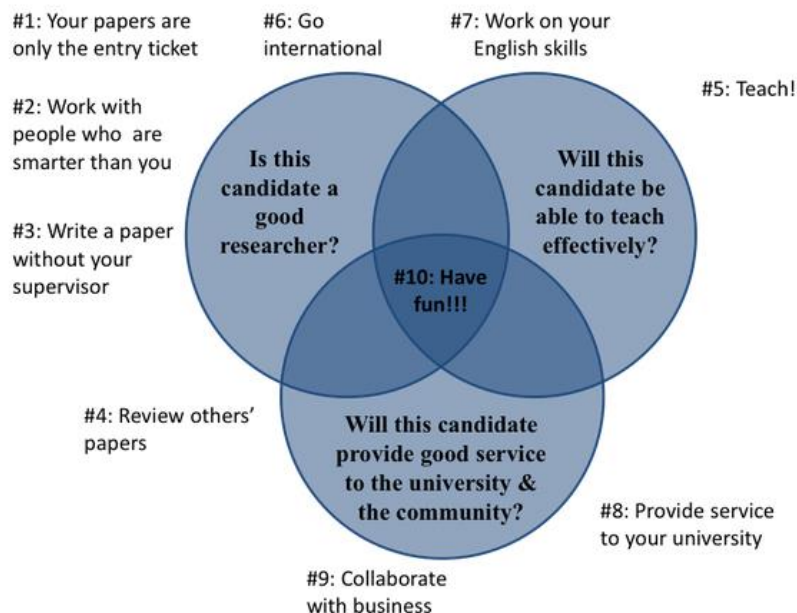
#10: Above all, have fun!

Writing a PhD can be a serious issue. You dedicate your life to understanding a certain issue, spend hours at your desk analyzing data, and experience a writer's block every now and then. Please remind yourself constantly that doing research should be fun! Savor the talks at the coffee machine. Go out for a drink with your colleagues. Make a trip around the city where a conference is held.

One of my most memorable conference experiences has the following keywords: SERVSIG 2010, Porto, night club, Javier Reynoso. Just ask me about the story next time we meet!



As shown in the figure, these ten issues relate to three major domains: Research, teaching, and service. Basically, recruiters have three questions in mind: (1) 'Is this candidate a good and independent researcher?', (2) 'Will this candidate be able to teach effectively?', and (3) 'Will this candidate provide good service to the university and to the community?'. If you excel at one, but fail at the other two, chances of transitioning to an assistant professor position are very low.



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